

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 556

CS 506 327

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TITLE The News Media and Their Critics.  
PUB DATE Jul 88  
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).  
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Journalism Education; Media Research; Negative Attitudes; \*News Media; Surveys  
IDENTIFIERS \*Critics; \*Press Criticism

## ABSTRACT

To investigate the nature, content, and validity of criticisms of the news media and to determine whether these criticisms are made objectively, a study surveyed 550 members of the Mass Media and Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Response rate was 41%. Questions examined statements about the news media and their performance, ten well-known news media critics, and demographics of the respondents. The following news media critics were covered in the survey: Ben Bagdikian; Edwin Diamond; Edith Efron; Jeff Greenfield; Reed Irvine; Norman Isaacs; Ron Power; Richard Reeves; David Shaw; and Cal Thomas. Results indicated that respondents' knowledge or lack of knowledge about the news critics had a significant bearing on how they answered questions dealing with the critics. Results showed, moreover, that many journalism educators lacked knowledge about news media critics even though the critics are widely publicized and published. (Seven tables of data are included.) (MM)

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# THE NEWS MEDIA AND THEIR CRITICS

By

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JANUARY - JUNE 1988

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This is a study of the News Media and Their Critics conducted by Robert Oliver Shipman, Associate Professor of Mass Communications, Mankato State University, Mankato, Minnesota, under the auspices of a faculty research grant from the University for the fiscal year 1987-88:

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the nature, content and validity of criticisms of the news media and to determine whether these criticisms are made dispassionately and objectively or whether they stem from the bias of the critics.

### **GENERAL FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

Through the use of a questionnaire mailed to 550 members of the Mass Media and Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, 227 of whom responded (41.3 percent), it is evident that the respondents (1) concur with a range of positive and negative statements about the news media and their performance; (2) are mixed in their assessment of the knowledgeability, reliability, fairness, political persuasion and attitudes toward the news media of a select group of news media critics, a condition that stems, for the most part, from lack of recognition and knowledge of the critics; and (3) have considerably less knowledge of the news media critics than does the maker of the study.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts: (1) statements about the news media and their performance, (2) questions about 10 news media critics and (3) questions about the demographics of the respondents.

## **2) The News Media and Their Critics**

### **SPECIFIC FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

#### **1. STATEMENTS ABOUT THE NEWS MEDIA AND THEIR PERFORMANCE**

The majority of respondents (60 percent or better) AGREE with these statements about the news media. The news media

- are arrogant and insensitive to the public trust.
- are monopolistic and self-serving, catering to their corporate owners.
- are insensitive to readers', viewers' and/or listeners' feelings.
- distort and sensationalize the news in order to increase circulations or gain audience ratings.
- set the national agenda regardless of which political party is in power.
- are monopolistic in their use of channels and limit the public's access to them.
- progressively have become part of what they report so that they now are participants in the news.
- deal more with entertaining than with informing readers, listeners and viewers.
- emphasize personalities rather than issues in covering political campaigns.
- make news insignificant by trivializing information rather than by emphasizing matters of consequence.
- overstep propriety in reporting the personal lives of public office holders or seekers.

### **3) The News Media and Their Critics**

**The majority of respondents (60 percent or better) ALSO AGREE with these statements about the news media. The news media**

- are insensitive to the victims or survivors of tragic events by exposing these people's emotions to public view.
- are monopolistic in their use of channels and outlets for communications and thus limit the public's access to them.
- when faced with criticism, are receptive to modifying and changing their behavior.
- are dupes of protest groups and let themselves be taken in by psuedo events.
- treat political campaigns as horse races rather than emphasizing the issues the candidates espouse or discuss.
- in covering religion emphasize some religionists' errancies rather than stress the positive values religion provides society.
- in their rush to be first with the news, provide their readers with erroneous and misleading information .

**The majority of the respondents (60 percent or better) DO NOT AGREE with these statements about the news media. The news media**

- are biased toward left-wing or liberal advocates and causes, giving greater attention to them than to right-wing or conservative advocates and causes.
- judge society's morals more than they report them.
- lack a social conscience, holding little or nothing sacred and reporting anything they believe that will titillate their readers, listeners and/or viewers.
- are dominated by liberal reporters and editors whose bias is reflected in their reporting and disseminating information to the public.
- support protestors against government and criticize government instead of reporting the news impartially.

#### **4) The News Media and Their Critics**

The respondents are about evenly divided (50-50) between AGREEING AND NOT AGREEING with these statement about the news media. The news media

- revel in their power and wield it rather than accept corresponding increase in responsibility.
- cover up stories they ought to report to the public.
- are dominated or influenced by advertisers; therefore, they withhold information that is unfavorable to advertisers.

#### **2. RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF 10 SELECT NEWS MEDIA CRITICS**

(The news media critics covered in the survey are: Ben Bagdikian, Edwin Diamond, Edith Efron, Jeff Greenfield, Reed Irvine, Norman Isaacs, Ron Power, Richard Reeves, David Shaw and Cal Thomas.)

##### **A. Critics Known By Respondents (percentage of responses)**

|            |      |         |      |
|------------|------|---------|------|
| Bagdikian  | 93.1 | Diamond | 59.2 |
| Greenfield | 74.5 | Power   | 55.1 |
| Efron      | 64.7 | Reeves  | 54.2 |
| Irvine     | 63.4 | Shaw    | 47.9 |
| Isaacs     | 62.4 | Thomas  | 35.7 |

##### **B. The Critics' Political Persuasion As Perceived By Respondents**

Bagdikian, Greenfield: left wing

Diamond, Isaacs, Power, Reeves, Shaw: center

Efron, Irvine, Thomas: right wing

##### **C. Critics Considered Knowledgeable of the News Media As Perceived By Respondents (percentage of responses)**

|            |      |        |      |
|------------|------|--------|------|
| Bagdikian  | 89.9 | Power  | 48.2 |
| Greenfield | 69.8 | Reeves | 48.2 |
| Isaacs     | 62.1 | Shaw   | 47.9 |
| Diamond    | 60.2 | Efron  | 47.8 |
| Irvine     | 55.1 | Thomas | 31.1 |

## 5) THE NEWS MEDIA AND THEIR CRITICS

### D. The Critics' Attitudes Toward the News Media As Perceived By Respondents

Positive: Greenfield, Isaacs  
Negative: Bagdikian, Irvine  
Don't Know: Diamond, Efron, Power,  
Reeves, Shaw, Thomas

### E. Reliability of Critics As Perceived By Respondents (percentage of responses)

|            |      |        |      |
|------------|------|--------|------|
| Bagdikian  | 85.0 | Power  | 44.6 |
| Greenfield | 68.0 | Reeves | 41.2 |
| Diamond    | 56.7 | Efron  | 29.5 |
| Isaacs     | 56.0 | Irvine | 22.5 |
| Shaw       | 46.0 | Thomas | 18.8 |

### F. Fairness of Critics As Perceived By Respondents (percentage of responses)

|            |      |        |      |
|------------|------|--------|------|
| Bagdikian  | 81.2 | Power  | 45.5 |
| Greenfield | 66.0 | Reeves | 40.3 |
| Diamond    | 56.0 | Efron  | 27.7 |
| Isaacs     | 46.8 | Thomas | 20.4 |
| Shaw       | 46.8 | Irvine | 19.8 |

### G. Critics' Reflection of Respondents Own Assessment of the News Media's Performance (percentage of responses)

|            |      |        |      |
|------------|------|--------|------|
| Bagdikian  | 77.1 | Power  | 39.0 |
| Greenfield | 61.5 | Reeves | 34.0 |
| Isaacs     | 50.0 | Efron  | 19.7 |
| Diamond    | 49.5 | Irvine | 14.1 |
| Shaw       | 42.9 | Thomas | 11.5 |

## **6) The News Media and Their Critics**

### **3. DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS**

- Men outnumber women 4 to 1.
- Two thirds of the group range in age from 30 to 49.
- two thirds of the group have doctorates.
- 52.5 percent are Democrats, 38.7 percent are independents, 6 percent are Republicans and 2.8 are another affiliate.
- 41.1 percent are Protestants, 27.4 have no preference, 14.2 percent are Catholic, 9.6 percent are Jewish and 7.8 are of another faith.
- 91.5 percent are educators, 6.0 are media professionals, 1.5 percent are otherwise employed and 1.0 percent are retired.
- As educators, 10.2 percent are instructors; 28.2 percent are assistant professors; 26.2 percent are associate and full professors, respectively; 12.6 percent are chairpersons; and 2 percent are deans.
- As educators, 72.7 percent are at public universities, 13.4 percent are at private universities, 8.6 at private colleges, 4.8 are at public colleges and .5 percent are at sectarian colleges.
- 85.4 percent deal with criticism of the news media in their classes.
- 67.3 deal with criticism as a structured part of their courses.

### **COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The respondents' knowledge or lack of knowledge of the critics has much bearing on how they answered questions dealing with the critics. Also the respondents' own demographics have an influence on their responses. The low percentages of responses for Efron, Irvine and Thomas, who are perceived as right wing, are reflected in the 91.2 percent of the respondents who are Democrats and/or independents

The study shows that journalism educators are interested in the news media and their critics. At least 85 percent of them deal with both in their classes, two-thirds deal with both as a structured part of their courses and 60 percent requested a copy of the study's findings.

## 7) The News Media and Their Critics

The study also shows that many of the journalism educators surveyed lack knowledge of the news media critics even though the critics are widely publicized and published. Ron Power, for example, has won a Pulitzer Prize for criticism, the only media critic to do so.

And the study shows that the vast majority of the respondents (92.4 percent) say the news media are doing a responsible job of keeping their readers, listeners and viewers informed of what is going on in the world even though the respondents agree with many of the negative criticisms of the news media presented to them in the survey.

The study has been worthwhile and productive. It has provided incentive for me to continue with my explorations in a relatively untapped area of knowledge and research.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank these people at Mankato State University for their invaluable support and assistance: Dean Jane Earley and Associate Dean Charles Phiel, College of Arts and Humanities; Professor of Computer Science Donald Henderson; Associate Professor of Library Science David Allan; Assistant Professor of English Nancy McKenzie; Charles Lewis, instructor in Mass Communications; Greg Asher and Nancy Flynn, Computer Services; Kathy Steiner, secretary, Mass Communications Institute; and Mass Comm majors Rich Sills and June Utech. Thanks go also to John Gaterud, editor and publisher of the late *Minnesota Times*, and to my wife, Jeanille.